



Remote Participation Study Committee

Date: **January 4, 2022**

Time: **7:30 – 9:30 pm**

Location: Virtual, via Zoom.

Minutes

Attendance: Mustafa Varoglu, Chair, Jennifer Susse, Co-Chair, Stacie Nicole Smith, Secretary, Alexander Bagnall, Janice Cagan-Teuber, Jim Feeney, Eric Helmuth, Rachel Zsembery. Bill Hayner

Members of the Public:

Elizabeth Dray

AGENDA

1. Review and accept meeting minutes from Dec 14, 2021 meeting
2. Public Comment – 15 minutes
3. Public Engagement with RPSC Survey Update – 20 minutes
4. Review of Draft Executive Summary – 60+ minutes
5. Future business – 10 minutes

Decisions Reached and Action Items:

- **Minutes were approved.**
- **Chair to make sure meeting minutes and Town and Board Survey Report are posted on the Committee's website**
- **The Committee agreed to complete their report by January 18, with a goal to present to the Select Board on Feb 7.**
- **Committee members will send any comments on recommendation language on this draft by 5:00 pm Friday. Jen, Mustafa, and Alex will consolidate and send a draft by the end of the weekend, and resend to the group.**
- **The Committee will send any final recommended changes, and meet again on Tuesday Jan 11 6-7 to finalize and vote out the report.**

Summary of Discussions:

Approval of the Minutes:

Minutes were approved, and reiterated the need to get the minutes onto the website, along with approved reports.

Public Comment: Elizabeth asked to be able to follow along in the draft documents during discussions. They were sent to her.

Public Engagement with RPSC Survey Update: Members were comfortable with the revisions to the report and agreed it should be included, along with the report from committees, with the report to the Select Board.

Review of Draft Executive Summary

The committee turned to reviewing the draft Report to the Select Board, by pulling up the draft recommendations and editing on the document. A record of edits can be found in the draft report, attached. Additional discussion points below.

- Note that we examined the report of the researchers in the process section on page 3.
- Looking at the Ranked recommendations:
 - #4, we can't say let's do all of these – we should say do one first
 - Continue our study looping in town staff to see which makes the most sense – still anticipate using CARES act or ARPA \$, but maybe not all.
 - Don't limit to one. Say, these are the rooms identified.
 - Important to do more than 1. ID the top 3 and say, will be validated by staff
 - At least 2 with different technology
 - Asked the disability commission, all wanted to be part of a pilot of hybrid meetings. Been at the Arlington Community Center (formerly Arlington Senior Center), that would be a place that would need to be equipped.
 - Optimistic that Select Board will be open to sharing their space – informally.
- Two other recommendations:
 - Advocate for allowing fully remote
 - Add statement about clarity of rules for remote
 - In #2: parity might not be possible – esp for the ARB.
 - Put a carve out for anything physical. Not just ARB, also Parks and Recs. Sample materials may be available only for

Need to clarify who needs to authorize public bodies to allow public participation.

Does TM meeting need to do that? Maybe add a placeholder article in case

Process for Finalizing the Report:

- Have it finished on January 18, to present to the Select Board on January 24 or perhaps the following meeting (Feb 7)
- Committee members send any comments on recommendation language by 5:00 pm Friday. Jen, Mustafa, and Alex will consolidate and send a draft by end of the weekend.
- Meet again Tuesday Jan 11 6-7 to finalize and vote out the report.

Future business:

- Chair will propose some dates for the meetings going forward, aiming for every 3 weeks.

Meeting adjourned at 9:30 pm.

DRAFT FOR DISCUSSION
Remote Participation Study Committee Report
Interim Report to the Select Board, January 2022

Introduction

The Remote Participation Study Committee (RPSC) was created as a result of a positive vote on Article 40 during the 2021 Arlington Town Meeting and convened on Sept 29, 2021. The RPSC was charged to consider the following items:

- A. Evaluating the benefits and challenges of providing hybrid forms of public meetings
- B. Assessing which public bodies can and should provide remote participation
- C. Examining what portions of meetings can and should be available for remote participation
- D. Determining what, if any, local rules beyond legal requirements can and should be established for remote participation
- E. Understanding the costs of different models of remote participation, especially hybrid remote participation
- F. Evaluating the impact of remote participation on accessibility requirements and concerns
- G. Assessing ways that public bodies provide information to the public about their work

Following consideration of the items above, the Article directed the committee to

1. Provide a report to the Town Clerk and Select Board on or before January 15, 2022 to:
 - i. Make ranked recommendations with respect to remote participation policies in the Town of Arlington; and
 - ii. Offer any recommended Town Meeting warrant articles for inclusion on the 2022 Annual Town Meeting Warrant; and
 - iii. Offer any recommended actions that the Select Board can immediately take under its own authority that do not require the necessity of a bylaw or the additional appropriation of funds not available in the current budget.
2. The Committee shall provide a final report to the 2022 Town Meeting on all the subjects listed above.

The Remote Participation Study Committee members are: Mustafa Varoglu (Chair), Jennifer Susse (Vice-Chair), Stacie Smith (Secretary), Alex Bagnall, Janice Cagan-Teuber, James Feeney, Bill Hayner, Eric Helmuth, Rachel Zsembery.

This is an interim report. Before the 2022 Town Meeting the Remote Participation Study Committee will develop guidelines for best practices for remote participation, including suggested rules and procedures for conducting hybrid meetings and recommendations for additional technology purchases and staff time. This additional material will be presented by the RPSC to the 2022 Town Meeting.

Ranked Recommendations – Order to be set later

1. The Select Board, School Committee, and Town Moderator should authorize remote access to allow hybrid participation in meetings held by all boards, committees, and commissions under their purview.
2. The Town should have an Outreach person on staff to increase diversity, awareness of, and participation in hybrid meetings. – This is part of additional staff TBD
3. The Town should invest in locations and technology to enable hybrid meetings in 2022 for the following committees: Select Board, School Committee, Redevelopment Board, Zoning Board of Appeals, Park and Recreation Committee, Diversity Task Group, and Transportation Advisory Committee, Disability Commission.
4. To the extent possible in-person committee members and public participants, and remote committee members and public participants, should have equitable access during hybrid meetings. Committees should have the same participation rules for in-person attendees as for remote attendees.
 - a. This includes access to displayed material, training may be needed to make meeting members know how to do this.
5. The Select Board, the School Committee, and the Town Manager are asked to set a policy for actions to be taken if there is a technology failure during a hybrid meeting.
 - o Options to consider following loss of video- or teleconferencing capabilities include i) halt the meeting and rescheduling, ii) the local meeting continues, iii) local meeting continues with a delay to allow remote participants time to travel and join in person.
6. Maybe for SB or for RPSC – what are the expectations for who has to be in person at the meeting to allow business of the meeting to conclude within a deadline.
 - a. This may be more applicable for meetings with applicants who appear before them i.e. ARB, ZBA, SB
7. Update technology in Select Board Chambers to allow remote participation usage without a dedicated operator from ACMi.
8. Allow other boards, committees, and commissions to use the Select Board room. The Select Board will have power to ask other meetings to relocate or reschedule in the event of a Select Board need for the room.
9. Equip the following meeting spaces for remote participation in 2022 (figure out priority. List which are by cart and which are more integrated into the room)
 - a. Lyons Hearing Room
 - b. Town Hall Annex, First Floor Conference Room
 - c. Town Hall Annex, Second Floor Conference Room
 - d. Town Hall Annex, Town Manager's Conference Room
 - e. Public Safety Building – O'Neill Community Room
 - f. Community Center – H&HS Conference Room

- g. Other Community Center Room
 - h. 3rd Community Center Room
10. The performance of the hybrid meeting aspect of the meetings identified in Recommendation #2 should be monitored for efficiency of managing and implementing the hybrid meeting format from the perspective of the in-person and remote meeting organizers and the public attendees. This information can be used to improve and expand hybrid meeting capabilities.
 11. Ask for advocacy from SB, Town Meeting or others to ask for State law change to permit all remote Open meetings. This would be a big advantage for small committees, we did not survey this option.

Town Meeting Warrant Article

The Remote Participation Study Committed does not recommend submitting a Warrant Article to the 2022 Warrant. The Select Board, The School Committee, and the Town Manager have the authority to continue to permit remote participation for meeting held under the Open Meeting Law of MA and no formal bylaw changes are needed to implement the recommendations of the RPSC.

Actions the Select Board can Implement Immediately

The SB can ask the TM to start working on technology assessments, staffing for meeting support and what can be funded by ARPA funds or other sources of funding.

Information Collected to Consider Charges and Inform Recommendations

In the fall of 2021, the RPSC conducted two surveys to learn about the opinions of members of the Town Boards, and Committees, and Commissions and of the general public with regards to hybrid meetings. The results of these surveys indicated significant support for hybrid meetings, helped clarify which meetings the public would want prioritized for hybrid meetings, and identified concerns shared by Board, Committee and Commission members and the general public about how the meetings would be conducted from an organizational and technical perspective. In addition, two members of the committee (Alex Bagnall and James Feeney) explored the technical requirements to support hybrid meeting and inventoried the rooms available now and expected to be available after April 1st when the emergency order allowing remote meetings may expire. For each survey a report was created that summarized the survey results and are available on the Remote Participation Study Committee website and attached as an appendix to this document.

- People are much more familiar with all remote and may not have much experience with hybrid meeting. This may skew answers and expectations for hybrid

A. Evaluating the benefits and challenges of providing hybrid forms of public meetings

In evaluating the benefits and challenges of hybrid meetings we incorporated comments from both surveys as well as the varied experiences of the group members. The benefits of hybrid meetings generally aligned with the benefits of fully remote meetings. The primary benefit was to the members of the boards, committees, and

commissions. Members reported that attendance was up and that interest in serving increased because it is easier for members to commit to meetings. A secondary benefit is that public participation at many of the boards, committees, and commissions increased compared to when meetings were in person. One disappointing finding is the anecdotal observation that while participation generally was up, the demographic make-up of the participants remained the same. That is, increased participation did not lead to a wider range of voices being part of the process. The observation is in line with evidence discovered by (cite Katie here). The challenges of hybrid meetings broke down into three larger categories: capital, operational, and policy. The capital issues are fairly straightforward and can generally be solved by allocating appropriate funds. ("We will have a better understanding of the capital requirements of our recommendations in the full report to Town Meeting 2022 but we expect them to be modest.)

The operational issues are much trickier. Running a hybrid meeting in a way that makes the experience similar for in-person and remote participants (assuming the technology is up to the task) requires both technical know-how, diplomacy, and attention to detail. For some meetings it might be possible for the chair to take on these tasks, but not all. In addition, hybrid meeting technology is more complicated than either in-person or fully remote. This will potentially call for some kind of formal technical support and training for meeting conveners. We will have a better understanding of the full financial costs of our recommendations in the full report to Town Meeting in 2022. We recognize that any recommendation that involves increased personnel may be hard to implement.

On policy issues in the full report we will recommend a set of best practices that will both be in compliance with state law, and which allows for consistent and transparent hybrid meetings that treat both types of participants—in person and remote—equally.

Benefits

- Ease of presentations
- Accessibility
 - Cloud-service closed-captioning possible
 - Physically accessible
 - COVID-safe
- Reduced travel time
- Reduced childcare needs
- Potentially increased participation for both for meeting attendees and committee members
- Members/public can attend even when out of town
- Ease of recording/broadcast (is this easy? It is easy to record a zoom call but will it be easy to capture everyone in the room? Depends on camera setup. Even if one camera is present, it is easier to capture than the previous standard for most committees, which was no cameras.
- Cost savings when paid consultants are required to attend

- Most obviously, savings to the town - Perhaps \$300/meeting, when an hourly consultant needs to travel to a meeting and can bill the town for that time
- Savings to petitioners to town boards like the ZBA

Challenges/ Disadvantages

- Capital
 - Equalizing the experiences for remote and in-room participants
 - Ongoing capital cost of technology
 - Limited meeting spaces equipped with appropriate technology
- Operational
 - Operational cost of technology **services and personnel**
 - Susceptible to user error in scheduling and starting meetings including possibility of temporary disruption to running meeting
 - Meeting Management
 - This is a challenge for someone who might also be trying to run the meeting and/or take minutes
 - **Will probably require a meeting member to deliberately dedicate effort to ensure that both remote and in person people are equitably represented**
 - Support issues
 - Differential comfort and skill with technology use
 - Zoom configuration issues
 - Zoom interface changes without notice
 - Other technology besides Zoom (e.g., Owl) might require some support, JS
 - Potential for malicious disturbances
- Policy
 - Under current law, a quorum of the voting members is required to be in person. If a hybrid meeting was convened in this manner, and the remote participation technology or service failed, the meeting could still go forward, legally. However, were the technology to fail in this way remote participants—both members and the public—would be disadvantaged.
 - Dependent on internet access and third-party services
 - Lack of internet access or internet device
 - Service interruptions can cut off remote participants
 - Lower barriers for uncivil behavior
 - Lack of uniform standards/policies for dealing with various technical contingencies.
 - Does not, on its own, reduce existing participatory inequalities (Einstein/Glick/Puig/Palmer). Greater outreach needed to reach less

involved communities and identify and mitigate other barriers to participation.

Benefits of attending remotely	Challenges of attending remotely
Can attend from home, out of town	Operational and capital cost of technology
Reduced childcare needs to attend meeting	Challenge in running meeting in person and remote
Reduces travel needs and costs for consultants	Loss of interpersonal interactions in person
Ease of recording and broadcasting	“Good” internet access required
Potential for increased participation	Lower barrier for uncivil behavior
	Does not reduce structural participatory inequalities
	Currently limited number of properly equipped rooms

B. Assessing which public bodies can and should provide remote participation

The RPSC focused on considering Arlington board, committees and commissions meeting held under the Open Meeting Law statutes. In general, these meetings are held under the authority of the Select Board, the School Committee, and the Town Manager and these bodies would need to continue to authorize remote access to these meetings to enable hybrid meetings.

The survey of the general public with regards to which meetings they would prioritize for remote access after return in to in person meetings were (ranked in order of most requested) were: School Committee and Select Board roughly equally, followed by the Redevelopment Board, Zoning Board of Appeals, Council on Aging, Disability Commission, Finance Committee, and Board of Health. From perspective of the Boards, Committees and Commission members survey, the results indicated that while the vast majority, 87%, of Arlington’s Boards, Committees and Commissions had a history of public attendance, most of the meetings did not have much attendance. However, there was a subset of the meetings, 22%, that did have strong public participation with more than 10 members of the public attending. The Envision Arlington Task groups, the Historic District Commission, the Redevelopment Board, the Select Board, and the Zoning Board of Appeals reported the greatest public attendance while the Select Board and the Parks and Recreation Commission also had a few large meetings. There were comments from the public and members of the board and commissions that interest in attending meetings in general varies according to the topics being discussed during specific time frames. The survey of the Boards and Commissions indicated greater support for remote participation than opposition to remote participation.

Based on the desire for the public to attend meetings remotely and the willingness of many meeting members to provide remote access to meetings upon return to in person meeting it’s recommended the Select Board continue to authorize access to allow meetings to have remote access and that meeting organizers incorporate

remote access to the meetings as part of their organizational duties. The RPSC suggests that the meetings of highest interest to the public (as identified by survey) be the pilot meetings in rolling out remote participation once meetings are held in person again. These meetings can be used to identify the technology and organizational solutions that allow for productive hybrid meetings.

C. Examining what portions of meetings can and should be available for remote participation

From an equity perspective all activities available to the public in an in-person meeting setting should be made available to remote attendees of a meeting. The RPSC has included this as one of the ranked recommendations to the Select Board.

The survey of the members of meetings revealed the different meetings had a variety of formats which led to different opportunities for public participation. Some meetings have no set periods for public input, some had the public or consultants provide input within specific portion of the meeting, others had set periods for open input to the Boards, Commissions and Committees. Due to the differences in the manner (or lack of) public input and comments during the different types of Boards and Commissions meetings a blanket recommendation on the details of public participation during the meetings would not be practical but providing equal access to in-person and remote participants to be heard is recommended.

D. Determining what, if any, local rules beyond legal requirements can and should be established for remote participation

The Remote Participation Study Committed does not recommend a Warrant Article to the 2022 Warrant. The Select Board, The School Committee, and the Town Manager have provided the authority for remote participation for meeting held under the Open Meeting Law of MA and no formal Bylaw changes are needed to implement the RPSC recommendations in this report.

In place of Bylaw changes or other legal requirements, the RPSC proposes the **guiding** principles below for remote participation in meetings when the Emergency Order permitting remote only meetings in Massachusetts expires in April 2022. While the RPSC recommends the Town start with a limited number of meetings with remote participation the goal is to expand the hybrid format to all meetings held by Town Boards, Commissions and Committees. These guiding principles were written with the consideration that all meetings in the future will have a remote access capability to enable hybrid format meetings.

Meeting Conduct

- a. To the extent possible a remote option should be present for all meetings that are held in person.
- b. Meeting members and attendees present locally and remotely should be able to see and hear each other throughout the meeting
- c. Speech transcription and recording of the meeting should be enabled for the duration of the meeting.
- d. Video and audio records of meetings should be stored for **XX** months/ years

- e. The meeting organizer or chair should specify the opportunities (or lack of opportunities) for remote access as part of the agenda announcement. This will be necessary in the transition period from a few initial meetings having remote access until the time all meetings can have a remote access option.
- f. If interactive remote access is a challenge, meeting organizers should provide an audio and video feed of board members discussions. The meeting organizer should repeat any questions or comments asked by meeting local and remote attendees to allow all attendees to hear each other.
- g. A policy set by Select Board, The School Committee, and the Town Manager for the loss remote access during a meeting should be followed if that situation arises.
 - a. Options for the SB, SC and TM to consider following loss of video- or teleconferencing capabilities include: halt of the meeting and rescheduling or the local meeting continues, perhaps with a delay to allow remote participants to join in person.
- h. The Chair of the meeting is encouraged to delegate a person to manage the remote communications. The duties of this person may include allowing remote participants to enter the meeting, noting when people have their hand up to speak, monitoring to prevent Zoom bombing, and communicating any questions that may come up in the chat function.
- i. When the minutes of the meeting are completed names of local and remote speakers, comments should be captured.

Technology and Room Recommendations

- j. The Town should create a consolidated list of hybrid-meeting enabled rooms on the Town Website to allow meeting organizers find these rooms easily for their meetings.
- k. If the Select Board and School Committee rooms are made available to host other Boards, Commissions or Committees the Select Board and School Committee will have priority for booking these room or asking other meetings to relocate or reschedule.
- l. Instructions on how to run the technology of hybrid meetings should be posted in rooms equipped for hybrid meetings, including accessing Town Zoom accounts for meeting chairs, appropriate Zoom or other teleconferencing settings, set up of microphones and video cameras for members and the local and remote audience.

E. Understanding the costs of different models of remote participation, especially hybrid remote participation

Type A

- Top-tier
- Two large displays
- Multiple cameras
- Presentation video input
- Individual microphones for board/committee members
- One microphone for public participation (could be improved?)

Staffing required - could be mitigated with more up-front technology expenditures

Computer for Zoom control

Example: Select Board, School Committee, hi-attendance ARB and ZBA

Estimate capital cost: \$75 to 125k

Type B

Two displays

One or two cameras

Presentation video input

Microphone array for board/committee

One or two microphones for public participations

Computer for Zoom control

Example: ARB, ZBA, TAC

Estimated capital cost: \$10 to 25k

Type C – fixed installation

One display

USB camera/microphone array on table

Computer for Zoom control

Example: Envision/ Diversity Task Group, Park & Rec

Estimated capital cost: \$3 to 8k

Type D – mobile on a cart – this may be a challenge to implement

No displays

USB camera/microphone array on table

Computer for Zoom control

Example: ACAC

Estimated capital cost: \$1 to \$3

Town is required to provide assistive listening compliant with ADA for people in the room at a public meeting held by the town (this would need to be on the “cart”)

Recurring monthly charges

- Zoom Room
 - \$50/month for service
- Zoom Webinar
 - \$80/month for service (500 attendees)
- Zoom Meeting
 - \$15/month (100 participants, no recording transcripts)
 - \$20/month (300 participants, recording transcripts)

Staffing

- Existing meeting support staff (already assigned to that meeting) - no additional cost
- New support staff (if needed for IT security or other policy reasons) - additional cost
- IT support staff on call for technical troubleshooting (needed?) - additional cost that might never go away

- Constraints: adding town staff time may involve overtime depending on the personnel, and/or challenges with established job duties in contracts, etc.

F. Evaluating the impact of remote participation on accessibility requirements and concerns

Hybrid participation in boards, committees, and commissions has many of the same accessibility benefits as does remote participation, provided that the technology is able to remove barriers for people who are blind/visually impaired and deaf/hard of hearing. Allowing members to work remotely enables more people to fully participate in meetings, regardless of mobility status. Furthermore, allowing a remote option potentially expands the pool of eligible people who can serve on those committees. Note that remote accessibility must concern not only physical disabilities, but also sensory (hearing, sight, etc.) disability and cultural (culturally Deaf people who use American Sign Language (ASL)). For public participation the issues are similar. Allowing remote participation in a hybrid meeting enables more members of the public to fully participate.

To further remove barriers to participation meeting spaces should be fully accessible. They should, for example be able to accommodate persons using wheelchairs and/or crutches. Also, materials presented prior to and during meeting—agendas, minutes, and slide decks—should be available in accessible formats (i.e., Braille, screen readers, ASL, etc.).

G: Assessing ways that public bodies provide information to the public about their work:

Fully answering this question will need to wait until after the spring 2022 Town Meeting when the committee will have more time to delve into these issues. Nevertheless, we do have some information from survey respondents about what they consider important. Survey respondents want meeting spaces that are fully accessible, well ventilated, and large enough for members of the public to attend. They want agendas and minutes that are easy to find, available prior to the meeting, and are located in a central location. Minutes should be published in a timely fashion after approval. Some survey respondents also suggested that boards, committees, and commissions adopt values and guidelines around civil discourse and productive use of meeting time.

Some boards, committees, and commissions have a well-understood and long-running operational understanding. Others are still learning. We recommend that all board, committee, and commission members should be trained in the following:

- Some of the more common issues raised by Open Meeting Law requirements
- Which items go into the minutes and in what format
- Which items require a vote, and what type of vote (e.g., voice or roll call)
- Where minutes and other committee materials should be archived
- What to do with correspondence (e.g., attach to minutes, attach to the agenda, or other)
- The efficient use of Zoom or other remote platforms being used, such as:

- Captioning
- Sharing screens
- Hosting/co-hosting and the privileges of same
- All other accessibility features